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# The major life events taxonomy: Social readjustment, social media information sharing, and online network separation during times of life transition

Oliver L. Haimson | Albert J. Carter | Shanley Corvite | Brookelyn Wheeler | Lingbo Wang | Tianxiao Liu | Alexxus Lige

School of Information, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan

**Correspondence**
Oliver L. Haimson, School of Information, University of Michigan, 105 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1285.
Email: haimson@umich.edu

**Abstract**

When people experience major life changes, this often impacts their self-presentation, networks, and online behavior in substantial ways. To effectively study major life transitions and events, we surveyed a large U.S. sample ($n = 554$) to create the Major Life Events Taxonomy, a list of 121 life events in 12 categories. We then applied this taxonomy to a second large U.S. survey sample ($n = 775$) to understand on average how much social readjustment each event required, how likely each event was to be shared on social media with different types of audiences, and how much online network separation each involved. We found that social readjustment is positively correlated with sharing on social media, with both broad audiences and close ties as well as in online spaces separate from one's network of known ties. Some life transitions involve high levels of sharing with both separate audiences and broad audiences on social media, providing evidence for what previous research has called *social media as social transition machinery*. Researchers can use the Major Life Events Taxonomy to examine how people's life transition experiences relate to their behaviors, technology use, and health and well-being outcomes.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Major life transitions and events often result in major upheaval in the lives of those experiencing them. A transition is a life change that impacts a person's life deeply and involves reconstructing a valued identity (Kralik, Visentin, & Van Loon, 2006). Social media enables information sharing, finding resources, and social connection (Ellison & Vitak, 2015), and thus it has potential to help people during times of life change. We examine major life transitions and events[1] people in the United States experience on a number of dimensions, including how much social readjustment each requires, how often people share each type of life event with different social media audiences, and to what extent people engage in online network separation (the extent to which they participate in online networks different from their networks of known ties) during each. In doing so, we build on a growing body of research in Information Science focused on people's information behaviors during life transitions (Bronstein, 2019; Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010; Clemens & Cushing, 2010; Genuis &

Bronstein, 2017; Lloyd, Pilerot, & Hultgren, 2017; Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016; Ruthven, 2019; Willson, 2019).

Drawing inspiration from Holmes and Rahe's influential 1967 taxonomy (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), we created a new taxonomy of the major life events that people face in their lives today. Although taxonomies of life events were created in 1982 (Tausig, 1982) and 1998 (Hobson et al., 1998), much has changed in the past two decades. For example, existing taxonomies did not include important life events such as addiction and recovery, personal reaction to political turmoil, and life changes related to LGBTQ+ identity (e.g., gender transition, coming out). Therefore, we created an updated taxonomy to fully understand people's life experiences and the online behaviors surrounding them. Methodologically, rather than drawing from clinical expertise to develop a list of major life events (as Holmes and Rahe (1967) did), we used methods that place people at the center of understanding their own experiences and what major life transitions and events mean to them. We call our instrument the *Major Life Events Taxonomy*: a list of 121 events that people considered to have a major impact on them, in 12 categories: Health, Financial, Relocation, Legal, Relationships, Family Relationships, Death, Career, Education, Lifestyle Change, Identity, and Societal (see Appendix A in supplemental materials).

*Social readjustment* is "the amount and duration of change in one's accustomed pattern of life resulting from various life events" (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). It "measures the intensity and length of time necessary to adjust to a life event, regardless of the desirability of this event" (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). For example, both marriage (a positive event for most) and job loss (a negative event for most) require substantial social readjustment. Change, even if it is related to a positive life event, is distressing for most people. Thus, social readjustment is a useful measure to apply to people's experiences around life events to understand which types of life events are most distressing and how this relates to online information sharing of those life events.

Increasingly, people share about major life changes on social media sites, whether with broad audiences, via direct messaging with particular people or groups of people, or with networks completely separate from their networks of known ties. For many life events, particularly those that are negative or stigmatized, people may not share about the event on social media at all (Andalibi, 2020; Haimson, Andalibi, De Choudhury, & Hayes, 2018). Depending on the type of event experienced, how positive or negative it is, and how much social readjustment it requires, people are likely to exhibit different sharing behaviors. We examine information sharing behaviors using the Major Life Events Taxonomy.

During life transitions, people sometimes retreat to online spaces separate from their networks of known ties to interact with others who may also be facing similar experiences (Andalibi, Haimson, Choudhury, & Forte, 2018; Schoenebeck, 2013). Haimson (2018) described this online network separation as *social transition machinery*, defined as the ways that, for people facing life transitions, multiple social media sites remain separate and serve different purposes, yet work together to facilitate these life transitions. While previous work has examined this phenomenon in particular life transition contexts (e.g., gender transition [Haimson, 2018]), we lacked knowledge on the overall landscape regarding which types of life events involve most social transition machinery. That is, when experiencing major life events, to what extent do people participate in separate networks among different social media platforms?

We contribute a new taxonomy of major life events that researchers can use to understand how life transitions people experience relate to their behaviors, health and psychological outcomes, and technology use. The complete taxonomy is included in Appendix A and online at http://oliverhaimson.com/MLET.html. In this work, we apply the taxonomy and correlate it with participants' social media information sharing behaviors to understand the extent to which people share about life changes with particular audiences. We find that events that require most social readjustment tend to be shared more on social media with both broad and separate audiences. Generally positive life events are more likely to be shared with broad social media audiences, while negative life events are less likely to be shared on social media. Several unique types of life events (e.g., gender transition, coming out as LGBTQ+, pregnancy, and starting a new job) are shared with both separate and broad audiences, and a wide range of life events involve online separation to some extent, demonstrating social transition machinery in action.

In this article, we address five research questions:

RQ1: What types and categories of life events should a contemporary taxonomy include?

RQ2: On average, how much social readjustment does each life event cause in a person's life?

RQ3: With which audiences do people share different types of life events on social media?

RQ4: How does social readjustment correlate with types of social media audiences people share life events with?

RQ5: How does valence (i.e., how positively or negatively a life event impacted a person) correlate with types of social media audiences people share life events with?

## 2 | RELATED WORK

### 2.1 | Social media information sharing and online network separation related to life transitions

Social media and other social technologies can be particularly helpful for people during times of life change. Studies show that online networks and resources benefit people during a wide range of life changes (Ruthven, 2019) such as beginning college (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2012), relationship breakups (Haimson et al., 2018), changing health conditions (Genuis & Bronstein, 2017; Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005), pregnancy loss (Andalibi & Forte, 2018), joining or leaving the military (Dosono, Rashidi, Akter, Semaan, & Kapadia, 2017; Semaan, Britton, & Dosono, 2017), job changes (Burke & Kraut, 2013), migrating to a new country (Bronstein, 2019; Lloyd et al., 2017), religious conversion (Guzik, 2018), transition into older adulthood (Brewer & Piper, 2016), coming to terms with a death in one's network (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013), and gender transition (Haimson, 2018; Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016).

Although social media can be beneficial during life changes and more broadly, people also face challenges using social media and social technologies during transitional life periods (Cherubini, Reut, Tyler, & Ortlieb, 2020). Challenges are sometimes due to norms and expectations within people's networks or on social media sites, which may constrain self-disclosures (Andalibi & Forte, 2018). For instance, positivity bias (Hoorens, 2014) and social desirability bias (Phillips & Clancy, 1972) can influence people to post primarily positive rather than negative content on social media (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014).

Life transitions are sometimes difficult to express on social media due to complexities around disclosure of transition-related information and self-presentation in a networked environment (Haimson, Brubaker, Dombrowski, & Hayes, 2015). Social media makes people's life events more visible and salient to others in their network (Hampton, Lu, & Shin, 2016). Context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2010) often occurs when people present changing identities on social media, thus people must actively manage self-presentation and segment audiences (Duguay, 2014). Privacy and disclosure are dynamic processes that people wish to have control over, but sometimes do not (Joinson & Paine, 2007), given the networked nature of privacy on social media (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Self-disclosure on social media sites allows people to access social support from others (Andalibi & Forte, 2018), but this often requires disclosing information to a wider audience than one would prefer (Ellison,

Vitak, Steinfield, Gray, & Lampe, 2011). Most people worry about the information that is available about them online, particularly health information, which is an important aspect of many life transitions (Rainie, 2016).

Managing social lives online is a complex endeavor, which for many people involves maintaining online identities and networks on several social media sites to separate different facets of one's identity (Devito, Walker, & Birnholtz, 2018; Haimson, 2018). People's information sharing practices differ substantially across different social media sites (Oh & Syn, 2015), and presenting self and sharing information differently among different social media networks is especially prevalent during life transitions (Liu, Glover, & Haimson, 2020). Previous work has examined how people use separate online spaces to communicate with similar others around life experiences including pregnancy (Gui, Chen, Kou, Pine, & Chen, 2017), motherhood (Schoenebeck, 2013), sexual abuse (Andalibi et al., 2018), alcoholism (Chuang & Yang, 2014), and presenting an academic identity (Jordan, 2019). Many of these online communities enable people to find support and empathy (Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005) and to disclose sensitive experiences (Andalibi et al., 2018).

Though previous research has examined online network separation during particular types of life events, how people manage online network separation during a wide range of life transitions remains understudied. Documenting people's social media information sharing surrounding a variety of life transitions can help inform future social media design that works toward reducing transition-related stress and promoting network support.

### 2.2 | Previous life event inventories and social readjustment scales

In 1967, psychiatrists Holmes and Rahe (1967) published the "Social Readjustment Rating Scale" (SRRS), an inventory of 43 major life events compiled based on the authors' experience as clinicians. Each was assigned a social readjustment measure, determined by asking survey participants to rate events based on how much social readjustment each required compared to other life events. The concept of social readjustment, which has been used primarily in the context of the SRRS, has remained useful for researchers throughout the years to study phenomena related to people's changing lives (Scully, Tosi, & Banning, 2000).

The SRRS enabled researchers to quantify how types of life changes, social readjustment magnitude, and quantity of life changes correlated with outcomes in people's lives (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). The SRRS and other scales like it (e.g., [Hobson et al., 1998; Tausig, 1982]) have been

**TABLE 1** Participant demographics

| | Survey 1, $n$ (%) | Survey 2, $n$ (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Total $n$ | 554 | 775 |
| Gender | | |
| Woman | 324 (58.5%) | 367 (47.4%) |
| Man | 228 (41.2%) | 359 (46.3%) |
| Non-binary | 2 (0.3%) | 50 (6.5%) |
| Transgender (lower bound) | 1 (0.2%) | 64 (8.3%) |
| Additional gender | 0 (0.0%) | 7 (0.9%) |
| Race/ethnicity | | |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 14 (2.5%) | 27 (3.5%) |
| Asian | 27 (4.9%) | 75 (9.7%) |
| Black or African American | 71 (12.8%) | 141 (18.2%) |
| Hispanic or Latino | 80 (14.4%) | 77 (9.9%) |
| Middle Eastern | 3 (0.5%) | 4 (0.5%) |
| Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander | 3 (0.5%) | 1 (0.1%) |
| White | 376 (67.8%) | 521 (67.2%) |
| Age | | |
| 18–24 | 55 (9.9%) | 154 (19.9%) |
| 25–34 | 86 (15.5%) | 213 (27.5%) |
| 35–44 | 93 (16.8%) | 133 (17.2%) |
| 45–54 | 113 (20.4%) | 104 (13.4%) |
| 55–64 | 93 (16.8%) | 106 (13.7%) |
| 65+ | 114 (20.6%) | 65 (8.4%) |

*Note:* Some percentages sum to greater than 100% because people could be in multiple gender and race/ethnicity categories.

useful for researchers across many fields because they enable correlation between life changes and health conditions. Yet such lists have many flaws (Scully et al., 2000), including granularity in what constitutes an event and how events relate to each other (Monroe, 1982).

In addition to these limitations, the SRRS is now over 50 years old, and in need of an update. Even Hobson et al.'s (1998) updated version is now over 20 years old and does not include many of modern life's important changes. Additionally, existing lists do not include many life changes considered primary research areas for life transitions researchers interested in social technology, such as transition from high school to college (DeAndrea et al., 2012) and military-related transitions (Semaan et al., 2017). Technology researchers face difficulty molding the SRRS or other existing life events taxonomies to fit their research purposes, given these limitations. As several examples, Dimond, Shehan Poole, and Yardi (2010) had to manipulate the SRRS substantially to apply it to online content,

and Hsiao and Dillahunt (2017) described the SRRS's outdated nature and lack of clarification as a limitation in their recent study. We provide an updated taxonomy.

# 3 | METHODS

## 3.1 | Creating the taxonomy (Survey 1)

To create the Major Life Events Taxonomy, we deployed a survey ($n = 554$) to an U.S. representative sample of the general population (panel provided by Qualtrics). Participant demographics are reported in Table 1. Survey 1 asked participants to describe, in an open-ended paragraph, major life events they have experienced (see Appendix B). To solicit a wide range of events, participants were randomly selected to receive one of three versions of the question, asking them to recall life events in different time periods: in the past 2 years, in the past 5 years, and in their lifetime. Next, we asked about audiences participants shared each of life events with on social media, followed by demographic questions. We refined the questions' wording through iterative pilot testing and workshopping. We ensured data quality by removing responses with survey completion times <1 $SD$ from the mean (similar to survey data quality standards [Qualtrics, 2020]), then manually inspected each survey response and removed those without meaningful open-ended answers.

We analyzed Survey 1 questions using qualitative open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to determine which events to include in the taxonomy and how to categorize them. At least two coders analyzed and open-coded each data point, then discussed and resolved discrepancies in person. Then, five authors met to collaboratively discuss any confusing or surprising data, and to refine the taxonomy. Rather than only prevalence, we sought to include life events participants described as having major impact on their lives. We also drew from the life transitions literature and included less common transitions that are widely recognized as causing major readjustment (e.g., pregnancy loss (Andalibi & Forte, 2018) and military transitions (Dosono et al., 2017)). We created and refined life event categories using life event classification methods described in the literature (e.g., clear inclusion and exclusion criteria [Cleary, 1980]), general taxonomy methods (e.g., hierarchical relationships [Hedden, 2016]), and affinity diagramming (Beyer & Holtzblatt, 1998). Our affinity diagramming procedure involved collaboratively organizing and grouping sticky notes representing each life event, and iterating on categories until we reached consensus (see Figure 1). Our analysis resulted in 120 life events in 12 categories (see Appendix A).

FIGURE 1 Affinity diagramming procedure [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

## 3.2 | Validating the taxonomy

Card sorting is an important taxonomy-validation method that enables researchers to understand how people categorize concepts (Hedden, 2016). We used an online card-sorting task (via Optimal Workshop, a popular online card-sorting software) to validate our taxonomy. Participants were provided with 120 digital "cards," which they were instructed to sort into our 12 life event categories using drag-and-drop functionality (see Appendix D for more detail). Card sorting enabled us to understand how closely our mapping of life events to categories matched participants' mappings. Thirty-one participants (separate from survey respondents) completed the task, where they categorized the life events into categories. We reorganized the taxonomy to place each life event in the category the majority of participants placed it in, with the exception of several life events that participants placed relatively evenly among multiple categories (these were discussed and agreed upon by the research team). Seventeen life events were initially displaced, primarily in the Lifestyle Change category, indicating that these types of life events are often related to multiple categories (e.g., Health, Identity). We asked card-sorting participants to list any life events they "expected to see in this list, that were not there," and did not learn about any new life events. Combining our multiple methods of life event categorization (affinity diagramming, card sorting), we conclude that our taxonomy's organization aligns with how participants categorize life events (Hedden, 2016).

## 3.3 | Applying the taxonomy (Survey 2)

In Survey 2, we used our Major Life Events Taxonomy to understand how much social readjustment each life event

required on average, and people's social media information-sharing behaviors around each of these events. Although our methods drew loosely from Holmes and Rahe's (1967) methods, we make the important distinction between life events that a person did and did not experience (Hough, Fairbank, & Garcia, 1976), and that someone close to them did and did not experience— procedures loosely adapted from Gray, Litz, Hsu, and Lombardo (2004). We workshopped each of the survey questions in group environments to refine the wording. Before deploying, we piloted Survey 2 extensively and iteratively revised questions until they were easily understandable for pilot participants. Additionally, we met with a survey methodologist at our university's survey research center to further improve our survey instrument. Survey 2 items are included in Appendix B.

First, we asked participants to select which life events in the taxonomy they had experienced in the last 2 years. We chose a 2-year timespan (in line with [Monroe, 1982]) because asking participants to recall life events from a longer timespan would cause memory and recall difficulties (Jenkins, Hurst, & Rose, 1979), while a shorter timespan would leave out many experiences. We also asked participants to select events someone close to them experienced in the last 2 years, if that person's experience personally impacted the participant and was not the same life event they had already reported experiencing themselves. We included life events experienced by close ties because in Survey 1, we learned that many people considered others' life events personally meaningful to them (Hampton et al., 2016). This also simplified the taxonomy, because rather than including items like "Change in health of family member" and "Child left home—married" as in Tausig's (1982) taxonomy, we could include each event

type once. For example, if a person experienced a change in their family member's health, they could select our taxonomy item "serious physical illness diagnosis" or "serious injury, accident, or physical ailment" as occurring for a close tie (e.g., spouse). Although experiencing a serious illness oneself and experiencing a spouse's illness are two different experiences, in Survey 1 we learned that people consider both to be major life events that impact them personally, and this held for many different types of life events.

Next, we asked participants which audiences they shared their life event with on social media. We included five audience types drawn from responses to Survey 1's open-ended questions about social media sharing behavior: anyone who follows me on social media/on particular site(s); a small group of close friends and/or family members on social media; particular individuals via 1–1 messaging on social media; people separate from my typical online network (e.g., on a different social media site, in a closed/secret group); I did not discuss or share about this on social media.

To measure social readjustment, we asked participants to rank the life events they had experienced from most to least amount of social readjustment required (in line with [Hough et al., 1976]). It is important to consider social readjustment relative to other life events. How much social readjustment an event requires is highly dependent on which other life events were also experienced concurrently. Thus, asking people to simply rate each life event's social readjustment would not be sufficient; ranking techniques have been found to be more accurate (Hough et al., 1976). In previous taxonomies, since many participants had not experienced some life events they were asked to rate, social readjustment ratings were primarily based on perceptions of experiences rather than experiences themselves. Thus, while our sample sizes for each social readjustment rating are lower than previous studies, ours are grounded in participants' personal experiences. Humans have difficulty ranking more than 10 items on ranked lists (Vannette, 2015). To address this challenge yet still gather data about a wide range of life events, for those participants who had experienced more than 10 life events, we randomly selected 10 to ask them to rank. This is why our sample sizes of items ranked are smaller than sample sizes of items experienced. Our social readjustment ranking algorithm was designed to provide an aggregate score for each life event based on how participants rated it relative to other life events they had experienced. To do so, for each event ranked by each participant, we divided that item's ranking by the number of events that person had ranked, inversed

that number so that a higher number indicated more social readjustment, then averaged that score over all participants who had ranked that event, and finally multiplied by 100 so that scores are reported on a 0–100 scale. This provided the social readjustment rankings reported in Appendix A.

We also asked participants to rate the valence of each life event they had experienced (on a 5-point Likert scale). Some life events (e.g., divorce, relocation) are negative for some people but can be positive for others, so valence was an important control variable to include in our regression models.

We deployed Survey 2 using panel survey company Prolific. Our sample (total $n = 775$) includes a representative U.S. sample ($n = 567$), additional U.S. participants from particular marginalized populations (racial/ethnic minorities ($n = 100$) and transgender and/or nonbinary people ($n = 100$)), and additional participants from a general U.S. participant pool ($n = 8$). Participant demographics are reported in Table 1. Survey 2 took participants on average 23.85 min ($SD = 13.05$). Participants were compensated at $12 per hour or greater.

We maintained survey data quality by removing data from participants who failed an attention check question, completed the survey in $<1$ $SD$ below the mean response time, or exhibited straightlining[2] (in sections of the survey with many radio button responses, not included in this article). In borderline cases, we examined participants' answers manually for implausible responses.

# 4 | RESULTS

## 4.1 | RQ1: What types and categories of life events should a contemporary taxonomy include?

To answer RQ1, we present our Major Life Events Taxonomy (see Appendix A, Table 3), which lists 121 events in 12 categories. All events may occur for one's *self* or for a *close family member or friend*. The most common life events included change in sleeping habits (48.5% of participants), change in eating habits (48.1%), mental health struggles or diagnosis (34.1%), major financial difficulty (34.1%), and new pet (25.7%). Our taxonomy also includes rare life events, such as joining the military and foreclosure. We acknowledge that the two most common life events can be responses to life events for some, and thus often occur in tandem with other life events; yet given their prevalence in people's lives, they are important to include in the taxonomy.
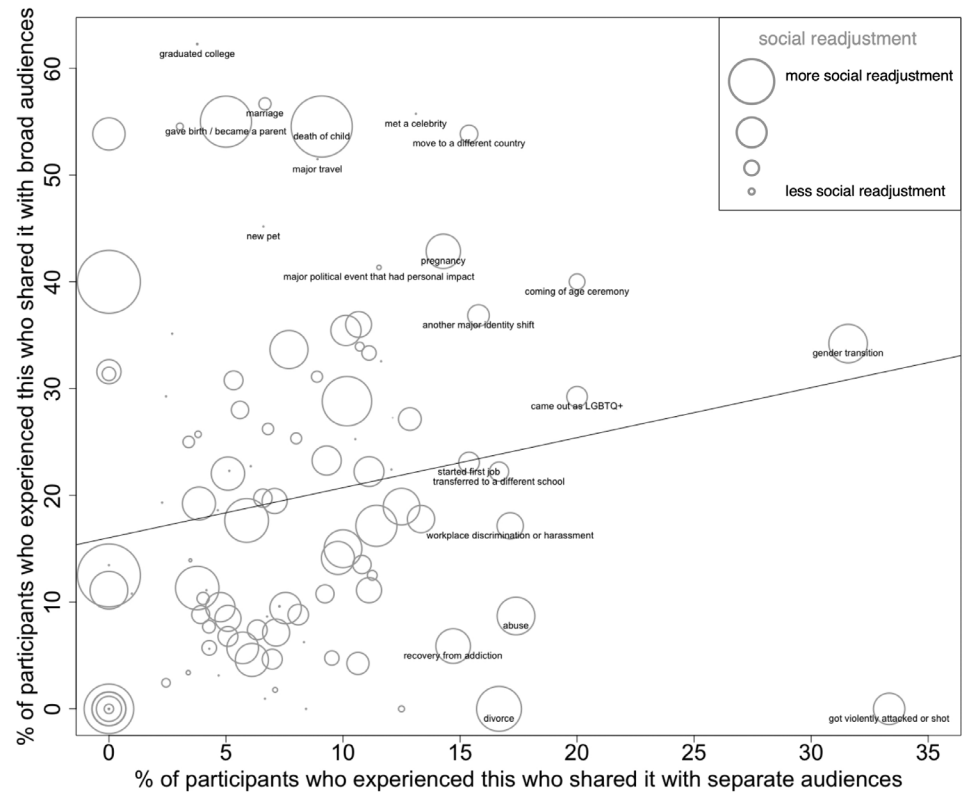
## 4.2 | RQ2: On average, how much social readjustment does each life event cause in a person's life?

To answer RQ2, we present life events requiring most social readjustment. Appendix A, Table 4 lists the 25 life events requiring the most social readjustment. The events requiring most social readjustment were death of spouse, going to jail or prison, death of child, and a close tie being violently attacked. Events with high social readjustment levels included those related to entry or departure of an individual from a person's life (e.g., becoming a parent, divorce, losing a loved one), identity shifts (e.g., gender transition, job loss, becoming disabled), and mental or physical health diagnoses.

## 4.3 | RQ3: With which audiences do people share different types of life events on social media?

Appendix A, Tables 5–7, lists life events most frequently shared with different social media audience types. Table 5 lists life events people share most often with broad social media audiences. Types of life events shared with broad audiences include those involving an identity change one wants to claim publicly (graduations,

becoming a parent, buying a home), negative events that would eventually become known to one's network (e.g., loss of a loved one), sharing one's current state (e.g., natural disaster), and exciting or positive life events (e.g., major travel, new pet). Table 6 includes life events least frequently shared on social media by any means, such as bankruptcy and menopause. Table 7 lists life events people most frequently share with audiences *separate from* their online networks of known ties. These include life events involving claiming a new identity (e.g., transferring to a different school), transitioning into a stigmatized identity (e.g., gender transition, coming out as LGBTQ+), and looking for similar others to find support online (e.g., pregnancy, surgery, abuse). Figure 2 visualizes the relationship between sharing life events with separate audiences versus broad audiences, indicating a slight positive correlation but also many life events that are shared more often with *either* broad or separate audiences but not both.

## 4.4 | RQ4: How does social readjustment correlate with types of social media audiences people share life events with?

To understand relationships between social readjustment and types of social media audiences people

**TABLE 2** Regression models showing relationships between social readjustment, valence (included in the models as an orthogonal second-degree polynomial), and sharing with social media audiences for major life events

| Variable | Shared with broad audiences on social media (Model 1) | Shared with separate audiences on social media (Model 2) | Shared with close ties on social media (Model 3) | Shared with individuals on social media (Model 4) | Not shared on social media (Model 5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Coefficient (*SE*) | | | | |
| Social readjustment | 0.21*** (0.05) | 0.10*** (0.02) | 0.10** (0.04) | 0.18*** (0.04) | −0.40*** (0.07) |
| Valence² (orthogonal) | 62.12*** (11.80) | 3.70 (5.29) | 26.81*** (8.02) | 9.10 (8.79) | −67.78*** (15.17) |
| Valence (orthogonal) | 102.33*** (13.23) | 11.87* (5.93) | 55.20*** (9.00) | 14.30 (9.86) | −133.68** (17.01) |
| Intercept | 1.70 (3.18) | 0.69 (1.43) | 8.38*** (2.17) | 5.10* (2.37) | 82.52*** (4.09) |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.30 | 0.07 | 0.19 | 0.10 | 0.31 |
| AIC | 1,722 | 1,366 | 1,551 | 1,591 | 1834 |

*Note*: Dependent variables are measured in percentages (percentage of people who experienced that life event who shared it with that audience). Social readjustment is on a 1–100 range, and valence is on a 1–5 range, which explains the coefficients' differences in magnitude. A coefficient of 0.21 means that the dependent variable increases by 0.21% for every increase of 1 in the independent variable.

$n$ = 232 types of life transitions/events (116 types of life transitions/events that may occur for a participant and/or for a participant's close tie).

*$p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

shared their life events with, we built five linear regression models (see Table 2). The outcome variable was the percentage of participants who shared this life event with this audience type, and independent variables included the life event's average social readjustment and valence. Because valence is significantly associated with social media audiences people share with, we included this in the models so that we could understand whether social readjustment was still a significant predictor even when controlling for valence. Multicollinearity was not present in the models, as the variance inflation factors were less than two.

People are likely to share on social media about events that involve substantial social readjustment. For all audience types (see Table 2, Models 1–5), social readjustment was significantly correlated with social media sharing behaviors. Social readjustment is positively correlated with sharing a life event with broad audiences ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < .001$), meaning that when a life change causes major upheaval in a person's life, they are more likely to share about that event with broad social media networks. At the same time, social readjustment is also positively correlated with sharing a life event with separate social media audiences ($\beta = 0.10$, $p < .001$), indicating that those life events that require most adjustment in people's lives tend to be shared with people apart from one's online network of known ties. Social readjustment is also significantly positively correlated with sharing with a small group of friends and/or family on social media ($\beta = 0.10$, $p < .01$) and sharing with particular individuals via 1–1 messaging on social media ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < .001$), demonstrating that when people experience substantial life changes, they often share with small groups of close ties and via private messages. Social readjustment is negatively correlated with not sharing about a life event on social media ($\beta = -0.40$, $p < .001$); when people experience major changes in their lives, they are likely to share about these events on social media in some way.

## 4.5 | RQ5: How does valence correlate with types of social media audiences people share life events with?

People are significantly more likely to share on social media about life events that impacted them positively. Upon visual inspection of the relationship between valence and sharing with each of the five audience types, we determined that these relationships were second-degree polynomial rather than linear. Thus, we included valence as an orthogonal second-degree polynomial function in regression models. Valence² was positively correlated with sharing with broad social media audiences and

**FIGURE 3** Scatterplot of the relationship between average social readjustment and average valence for major life events. Point size indicates amount of online network separation
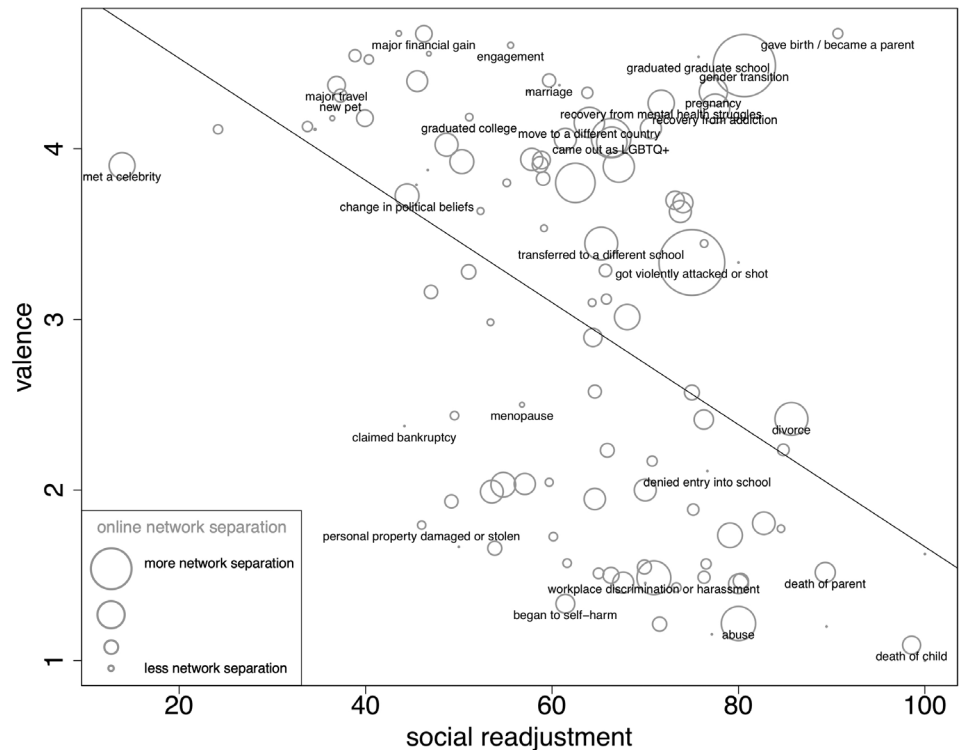


sharing with a small group of close ties on social media, and negatively correlated with not sharing about a life event on social media.

Valence is significantly negatively correlated with social readjustment ($r[220] = −0.48$, $p < .001$) (see Figure 3). That is, more negative events tend to involve more social readjustment. Some notable outliers include becoming a parent, gender transition, graduating from graduate school, and recovery from addiction and from mental health struggles, each of which is on average a positive life event yet involves substantial social readjustment. Even though valence and social readjustment are negatively correlated, they both are positively correlated with audience sharing in Models 1 and 3, and negatively correlated with not sharing on social media in Model 5 (see Table 2). That is, social media sharing behaviors are complex, and are associated with unique characteristics that may seem discordant. If only considering valence, we may think that people choose what to share on social media based only on how positive or negative an event is (e.g., to reduce stigma). Yet our models indicate that social readjustment may add substantial complexity to people's sharing decisions, such that an extremely negative event such as losing a child or spouse is likely to be shared on social media.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

The Major Life Events Taxonomy enabled us to understand people's social media information sharing

behaviors and social readjustment levels around a wide range of life events. We now discuss our results, then theorize our work using the *social media as social transition machinery* lens (Haimson, 2018). Some of our results validate prior research on people's experiences and information sharing behaviors around particular types of life events. Yet our unique contributions include (a) a comprehensive life events taxonomy, which enables studying and highlighting (b) patterns related to social readjustment and social media information sharing behaviors among a wide range of life events.

## 5.1 | Life transitions associated with substantial social readjustment

We found that life events with high social readjustment often involved one or more of the following: a new person entering or departing one's life, a substantial identity shift, and a health condition.

Our results indicate that the entry or departure of an individual from a person's life is associated with high social readjustment. The death of a spouse, child, parent, friend, and loved one all require substantial social readjustment (see Appendix A, Table 4). Losing a loved one can launch a tragic and difficult time in which people must cope and heal (Boelen, 2017). Similarly, we found that marital separation, divorce, and ending a serious romantic relationship require substantial social readjustment. After a space is vacated in someone's life, a

person requires time to reorient back into a normal routine. The addition of a new person into one's life, such as after giving birth or becoming a parent, also involves much social readjustment.

Life events associated with shifts or changes to one's identity also yielded high social readjustment rankings in our analysis. Some examples are gender transition, losing one's job, retirement, marital separation, and the ending of a romantic relationship. A life event that uproots an identity can be stressful, and the new identity may take time to take hold and start to feel normal.

We also found that health-related life events such as mental health struggles and being diagnosed with a serious physical illness have high social readjustment rates. Transitioning from healthy to unwell can be a pivotal point in one's life that new routines and sometimes a shift in one's self-concept (Dovey-Pearce, Doherty, & May, 2007). Additionally, many mental and physical health conditions are stigmatized, which can cause an individual to avoid seeking help or support—ultimately leading many to process their struggles alone (Corrigan, Druss, & Perlick, 2014). A mental or physical illness diagnosis can completely alter how someone navigates the world, and conquering the changes required takes time and effort before one can fall back into a stable routine.

## 5.2 | Social media information sharing behaviors surrounding life transitions

Previous research found that being in a liminal space impacts people's information behavior (Willson, 2019), and information behaviors differ based on one's life situation and stage in transition (Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016). Our results expand on prior work by highlighting social media information sharing patterns surrounding a wide range of life events. We found that people tend to share the following kinds of life events with broad audiences: an identity change one wants to make public, negative events that will eventually become known to one's network, events related to one's current state, and exciting or positive life events.

Life events involving an identity change that one wants to claim publicly may be a conscious and purposeful way to claim a new identity (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Graduating from high school, starting or graduating from college, gender transition, becoming a parent, purchasing a home, and getting married are all life events people in our study often shared with broad social media audiences. When a new identity is adopted, people leverage social media to diffuse the information to a broad audience of friends and followers.

Despite the positivity bias prevalent on social media (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014), people also sometimes share negative events with broad audiences. For example, participants in our study shared about the death of a child, parent, or loved one with broad audiences, likely to make the tragedy (which would eventually become known to their networks) known without requiring difficult conversations with many people individually (Andalibi & Forte, 2018; Haimson, 2018).

Our results indicate that people often share their current state as related to a larger societal event with broad social media audiences. For example, when a natural disaster occurs, people are likely to share their status with their entire network. This helps inform their network of how they were affected by the disaster and their safety status (Bjerge, Clark, Fisker, & Raju, 2016). Similarly, when major political events occur, people share how the event impacted them and express their viewpoints with their broad social media networks (Hossain, Dwivedi, Chan, Standing, & Olanrewaju, 2018).

Finally, we found that people tend to share exciting or positive life events with broad audiences. Major travel, getting a new pet, and meeting a celebrity are examples of exciting, positive life events that participants in our study shared with broad audiences. When something exciting or positive occurs in a person's life, they often want to share this event with their whole network (Tinto & Ruthven, 2016) as one way of presenting a positive self-image online (Utz, 2015).

Yet while broad social media audiences tend to see announcements of major life changes, we found that the potential struggles and processes involved in claiming a new identity are often captured and expressed instead to separate social media audiences, such as online forums (e.g., Reddit, Discord) and private or secret groups (e.g., Facebook and WhatsApp groups). People visit separate online spaces to discuss life events that involve claiming and processing a new identity, transitioning into a stigmatized identity, and finding others facing similar experiences, which previous research found can be a way to co-construct a new normal (Genuis & Bronstein, 2017). Those who shared their life events with separate social media audiences were often processing a transition into a stigmatized identity. Gender transition, coming out as LGBTQ+, and identifying sexual preferences are examples of life events that many participants shared with an audience separate from their online networks of known ties. Digital environments can be important for meaning-making (Lloyd et al., 2017; Ruthven, 2019), and thus separate online spaces can be safe environments for a person to try out a new identity before claiming it in their daily life (Haimson, 2018). Often, separate online spaces enable people to find community, support, resources, and

information throughout their life transition and the subsequent readjustment phase (Massimi, Bender, Witteman, & Ahmed, 2014; Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016).

Our results show that negative events with high social readjustment (e.g., abuse, workplace discrimination/ harassment, mental health struggles) are especially likely to be shared with audiences separate from one's network of known ties. Perceived stigma can make sharing one's experience difficult, and separate online spaces can provide an audience to "test out" disclosing a life event while minimizing the perceived risk associated with sharing the life event with one's direct network. Specific life event forums or groups provide spaces for people to express themselves while segmenting their experience from their network of known ties (Genuis & Bronstein, 2017; Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016).

We found that people are more likely to share their life events via 1–1 messaging for events with high social readjustment. Direct messaging provides greater control over one's audience—a person can individually select people in their network with whom they want to share. People may not want to share a life event with their whole network due to stigma and privacy concerns, and 1–1 messaging provides a communication channel to reach specific and trusted people in their network.

## 5.3 | Social media as social transition machinery across life transitions

Social transition machinery explains the ways that people separate their social media networks and connect with different groups of people on different social media sites during life transitions (Haimson, 2018). Our results indicate that social transition machinery applies to a large set of life events. Appendix A, Table 7 lists life events people tend to share with audiences separate from their networks of known ties: life transitions involving stigmatized identities (e.g., abuse, divorce, gender transition), and transitions during which it is helpful to connect with a new community online (e.g., transferring to a different school, moving to a new country). Each of these transitions involves social transition machinery, in which people become involved in new online communities while simultaneously existing within their previous social media networks. Although social transition machinery was developed in the context of gender transition, it applies broadly to life events that involve online network separation.

However, gender transition is also unique. For instance, as shown in Figure 3, among the outliers that involve both high levels of social readjustment and high valence, gender transition has the highest level of online network separation. Gender transition is one of the only life transitions that involves both high levels of online network separation *and* sharing with broad social media audiences (see Figure 2). That is, transgender people often retreat to transgender-focused online communities on sites like Tumblr, away from their networks of known ties, to explore identity and document transition (Haimson, 2018). Then, when they are ready to disclose to a broader network, they share about their transgender identity on a site like Facebook to a large audience of friends, family, and acquaintances (Haimson, 2018). Our results make clear that few life events involve this much network separation *and* this much broad sharing. The closest parallel is coming out as LGBTQ+, which involves similar identity exploration and community building in separate spaces followed by a broad disclosure (Devito et al., 2018). Other life events that involve high network separation and broad disclosure include when a close tie goes to war (in which case one may join an online network of others whose loved ones are at war), pregnancy, starting a first job or transferring to a new school, and experiencing workplace discrimination or harassment. Each of these likely involves finding groups of similar others online to share and explore a new identity, while at some point in the transition sharing with a broad audience.

Given that many life events involve substantial online network separation, it is important to consider how online spaces can be designed to support these experiences. Social technology designers must recognize that people present differently and share different types of information across multiple online spaces. This means that high attention to privacy, affordances for anonymity, and explicit design for online network separation are important elements of social media site design.

## 5.4 | The major life events taxonomy

A major contribution of this work is the Major Life Events Taxonomy (available in Appendix A and at http:// oliverhaimson.com/MLET.html), which differs from and expands prior life event taxonomies (Hobson et al., 1998; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Tausig, 1982) in several ways. First, we use methods that place people at the center of describing the life events that they considered impactful, rather than relying on secondhand reports from clinicians. Next, our taxonomy includes more items—121 as compared to 43 (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), 118 (Tausig, 1982), and 51 (Hobson et al., 1998). The taxonomy's size may be a result of our data collection methods, which ensured we heard from people with a wide range of experiences, and our categorization methods, which disambiguated some events which were grouped together in other taxonomies.

Finally, many years have passed since prior taxonomies were published, and new kinds of life events have become important societally (e.g., personal reaction to political events, LGBTQ+ related transitions).

## 5.5 | Limitations

This work has several limitations. First, this study was conducted in a U.S. context and may not generalize to other countries. Although our survey recruitment included a U.S. representative sample based on gender, race/ethnicity, and age, we oversampled for marginalized populations and thus our data are not fully representative and generalizable. Additionally, our study excludes non-Internet users and others who may not be reached by panel survey companies. Given these limitations, some life events may not be included in our taxonomy. Next, although we had a large overall sample size, relatively few participants had experienced some rare life events, leading to a high *SD* on those events' social readjustment averages. Some events included in the taxonomy (e.g., change in eating or sleeping habits) are sometimes responses to other life events, and may not be considered major life transitions for all participants. Our social readjustment scores' sample sizes are limited because participants ranked only 10 randomly selected events they had experienced, rather than all experiences. A final limitation regards the Covid-19 global pandemic. Our data collection occurred prior to the pandemic, and thus no participants mentioned the pandemic as a major life transition they experienced. However, in interviews we conducted in a later study, almost all participants considered the pandemic to be a major life transition that impacted them substantially. Thus, we added "pandemic" to the taxonomy (increasing it from 120 to 121 items) to increase the taxonomy's usefulness in future research.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

When people's lives are changing, researchers require instruments to measure how different types of life events correspond to social technology use. Our primary contribution in this paper, the Major Life Events Taxonomy, is a U.S.-based list of major life changes that people experience. Researchers can use the Major Life Events Taxonomy in future studies to understand people's behaviors around a wide range of major life changes. In this work, we used the Major Life Events Taxonomy to document social readjustment, social media information sharing behaviors, and online network separation around

different types of life changes. We found that social readjustment is positively correlated with sharing with both broad and separate social media audiences. That is, when people experience major upheavals in their lives, they tend to share these experiences with people both within and outside of their social media networks of known ties. Thus, social media works as social transition machinery—separate sites, identities, and networks work together to facilitate life transitions—for many different types of life events.

## ENDNOTES

[1] Hereafter referred to simply as "life events" or "life transitions" rather than "life transitions and events." Some life transitions are processes that take months or years to complete and involve multiple stages (e.g., divorce, gender transition), while others are events that can be pinpointed to a particular day yet also involve longer identity change processes (e.g., pregnancy, job loss). We use "life events" as an umbrella term to encompass life experiences involving both moments and processes of change.

[2] Straightlining is "the practice of providing the same answers down a matrix table to quickly get through the questions" and signifies low data quality in surveys (Qualtrics, 2020).

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